

Joseph and the Sin of Pride

Case 1: A Bad Report

In my last post, I began a study on the interpretation of Genesis 37 concerning the young Joseph that said that Joseph acted with pride in his dealings with his family, especially his older brothers, incurring their wrath against him, and making an already troubled family relationship even worse. My premise is that, given a detailed study of the Scriptures apart from tradition and conjecture, there is no direct evidence for reaching such a conclusion.

The first proof some commentators have offered as evidence of Joseph's pride was the "bad report" he made concerning his brothers mentioned in Genesis 37:2.

Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them. (NIV)

Let's consider the biblical evidence that explains why this was an evil or bad report.

First of all, could the report have been labeled bad because of its content? The Bible does not tell us if this was an accurate report. It only tells us that the report was bad or evil, which could mean that the report was given badly or with an evil purpose, or it could mean that the report was bad because its contents were of evil things, or it could have been bad because it was false.

Let's look closely at the words translated "evil report" in verse 2.

The Hebrew word for evil that is used here is the most commonly used word for evil in the Old Testament. About 80% of the time, the word is generally translated as evil, bad, or some form of the word wicked. At other times, it is translated more specifically to refer to that which is disagreeable, malignant, hurtful, and unkind or even vicious.

The word for report is used only nine times in the Old Testament. Three of those times it is translated as "evil report," but four times it is translated as slander.

Putting these two concepts together, one might reasonably come to the conclusion that this was an evil report because Joseph gave a vicious and slanderous, and possibly even untrue report to Jacob concerning his brothers. The problem is that such an interpretation of Joseph's behavior contradicts everything else the Bible has to say about Joseph.

Never once in all of one's study of Joseph will one discover such an attitude about him or such a reaction to his circumstances. There is no evidence that Joseph ever resorted to lying to achieve selfish goals or acted maliciously toward an enemy.

Alternatively, based on these definitions, one might conclude that the report was bad because it contained evidence and/or examples of the vicious slander that was being spread around the country concerning the sons of Jacob. This is the interpretation offered by at least two 18th century commentators.

The first of these is Professor Peter Lange. According to Professor Lange, the words used here for bad report refer to “a rumor whispered or creeping around.” According to Professor Lange, the reference to Joseph’s giving a bad report concerning his brothers “does not mean that Joseph made accusations against them, as the Vulgate has it, but that, in boyish simplicity, he repeated what he had heard about them.”¹ Boyish simplicity seems very far removed from malicious and slanderous intent.

Continuing with this same theme, The Pulpit Commentary agrees that Joseph did not report what he himself personally witnessed, but simply repeated the scandalous things that were “circulating in the district respecting” the evil characters of the brothers.² And the reports are not difficult to accept when we witness the attitude and actions the brothers take concerning the welfare of Joseph later in Chapter 2.

In the second place, was this report labeled “evil” to indicate that Joseph spoke badly of his brothers to Jacob because he was not happy with them about the way they treated him? Was Joseph guilty of being a tattle-tale – of running to his father to tell on his brothers for spiteful reasons, thus incurring his brothers’ wrath towards him?

The previous discussion addressed this question to a large degree. There is nothing specific in verse 2 to indicate Joseph’s intent or motives in making the report. To assume that he gave a slanderous report concerning his brothers for malicious purposes contradicts everything else we will ever come to discover about the character and personality of Joseph.

Furthermore, consider that there is no direct evidence from Genesis 37 or from the context of this part of Genesis that Joseph had ever been treated badly by his brothers prior to the events of verses 12ff. One might trace the origin of the ill treatment Joseph received from his brothers to the bad reports Joseph delivered to Jacob, but there is no evidence that the bad reports were spawned by Joseph’s ill treatment. If there was no previous ill treatment, what motive would Joseph have had for giving a slanderous report about his brothers?

Such an understanding is most likely the projection of our knowledge of subsequent events that take place in the story and our own knowledge of human nature. In other words, one assumes that, since the brothers treated Joseph so badly later in the chapter, they must have been treating him badly all along. And we have an idea that, if we were abused as we assume Joseph was, we would not be gracious in our reporting.

One might dig a bit further into this situation and ask, “Did the brothers in fact know that Joseph had made this ‘bad report’ to Jacob?” There is nothing in verse 2 to indicate that they did. Later, in verse 8, we read, “And they (the brothers) hated him (Joseph) all the more because of his dream and what he had said.” Those last few words, “what he had said,” could be construed to mean that, at the time Joseph revealed his dreams to his brothers, they were already aggravated with Joseph because of the bad reports he had delivered previously.

However, the context seems to indicate that this phrase refers more accurately to the incident of verses 5-7 where Joseph vocalized the content of his dream. This point will be dealt with a bit later in this article.

Commenting on Genesis 37:2, Jamieson, Fausset, Brown commentary provides the following concerning Joseph’s role as a shepherd and the content of the report:

Joseph . . . was feeding the flock – literally, "Joseph being seventeen years old was a shepherd over the flock" – he a lad, with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah. Oversight or superintendence is evidently implied. This post of chief shepherd in the party might be assigned him either from his being the son of a principal wife or from his own superior qualities of character; and if invested with this office, he acted not as a gossiping telltale, but as a "faithful steward" in reporting the scandalous conduct of his brethren. ³

These commentators are guessing that Joseph went to tend sheep in a supervisory role. They admit that such is "evidently implied." There is no direct evidence that such was true. Nevertheless, if all these things are true, and assuming that the report was accurate, then Joseph should be commended for his report as one who is reliable, and truthful. Thus Joseph is undeserving of a general condemnation by others just because the report he gave is defined as evil or bad.

More in line with the accusation of pride, one might ask, "Did Joseph give a bad report because he felt superior to his brothers and wished to demean them even further in his father's eyes with a truthful yet slanderous report?"

Read these comments from the *Expositor's Bible Commentary* concerning Joseph's bad report to Jacob:

Neither are we obliged to suppose that Joseph was a gratuitous tale-bearer, or that when he carried their evil report to his father he was actuated by a prudish, censorious, or in any way unworthy spirit. That he very well knew how to hold his tongue no man ever gave more adequate proof; but he that understands that there is a time to keep silence necessarily sees also that there is a time to speak. ⁴

In summary, there seem to be three options concerning the bad report:

1. The report was bad because it reflected the prideful nature of Joseph who felt superior to his brothers and took advantage of this opportunity to demean them even further in his father's eyes.

Solution: The Bible does not speak concerning Joseph's motives for giving the report. There is no direct evidence in the Scripture that Joseph's report was motivated by pride.

2. The report was bad because Joseph hoped to exact revenge on his brothers for the evil way that they were treating him.

Solution: There is no evidence that Joseph was ever treated badly by his brothers before being sold into slavery. Were that the case, why would Joseph have gone, seemingly alone and undefended, to find his brothers at Shechem? There is no evidence that he approached or entered their encampment with any reservation or sense of fear.

3. The report was bad because its contents were bad. Joseph either reported what he had witnessed, what he had heard from others, or possibly both.

Solution: Based on a literal reading of the text of Genesis 37, this appears to be the only alternative that remains true to the biblical narrative.

Thus we must conclude that, based on what "thus saith the Lord," Joseph cannot be accused of acting with pride when he gave his evil report to Jacob.

ENDNOTES

¹ Lange, John Peter. *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical, Doctrinal, Homiletical*, Vol. 1. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark. 1864, p 580.

² Exell, Joseph S; Spence-Jones, Henry Donald Maurice. "Commentary on [Genesis 37:1](#)". *The Pulpit Commentary*.
<http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/tpc/view.cgi?bk=0&ch=37>. 1897

³ Jamieson, Robert, A. R. Fausset and David Brown. *The Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*. 1871. *Online Bible* software, Copyright © 2014, Larry Pierce, Winterbourne, Ontario, Canada, N0B 2V0.

⁴ Nicoll, William R. "Commentary on [Genesis 37:1](#)". "Expositor's Bible Commentary".
<http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/teb/view.cgi?bk=0&ch=37>